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No other wrestler has Ric's Flair

Ric Flair is the greatest pro wrestler of the modern era.

That statement almost seems to invite debate. Yet, it is almost never debated.

Win or lose Saturday night, when he defends the National Wrestling Alliance version of the world title for the final time against Lex Luger, Flair will come out of the ring still regarded by the vast majority of wrestlers, insiders and fanatics as the best wrestler of modern times.

Flair has been voted Wrestler of the Year seven times in the past nine years by aficionados in the Wrestling Observer Newsletter poll. He was named Wrestler of the Decade by publications as diverse as the Observer, the mainstream Pro Wrestling Illustrated and virtually every other wrestling publication.

To wrestling fans, Flair's legacy is his six reigns as champion of the NWA. The Atlanta-based outfit is the oldest wrestling organization in the world and the second largest in the Western Hemisphere.



That places Flair tied for second place, with Lou Thesz (1937-66), for most titles since the early 1900s. Only Harley Race's record, as seven-time champion (1973-83), still remains.

GRUNT AND GRIN

BY DAVE MELTZER
FOR THE NATIONAL

But the records and awards are hardly indicative of his status as pro wrestling's master performer.

Greatness is mainly determined by the quality of a wrestler's matches. Several former world champions, such as his rivals, The Funk brothers, have gone on record as saying Flair has had more classic matches than anyone in history.

Flair's strength is not that he looks more impressive to a casual observer than anyone else while wrestling. It's not his wins and losses or even multiple world titles, which, it can be argued, are irrelevant. It's his ability to bring out the best in his opponent. It's his consistency. It's his stamina to wrestle from 20 to 60 minutes every night and carry opponents who don't have that kind of stamina for that length of time without fans knowing any better.

Many would argue that Flair had his greatest matches ever in 1989, at the age of 40. Nightly wars with the likes of Ricky Steamboat and Terry Funk are ranked among the best in history. And even though he hasn't had opponents of that caliber this year, his televised matches against Brian Pillman, Ricky Morton and a February pay-per-view match against Luger rank at the top of the list of 1990's best.

Flair, whose real name is Richard Fliehr, began wrestling late in 1972 out of Verne Gagne's wrestling camp in Minnesota. His career, which skyrocketed to the top by 1975, was nearly halted that year by an airplane crash, in which he suffered a broken back and was told by doctors that by the time he was 30, the effects of the injury would be crippling.

A year after the crash, he had recovered to the point where he was considered the heir apparent to then-champion Terry Funk. But it wasn't until 1981 when he became NWA champion — a time when the group was the world's dominant organization. By the mid-'80s, it was debated by many as to whether he was the greatest ever. The subject is rarely debated any longer.

CAPITOL COMBAT '90 LINEUP



Lineup for the National Wrestling Alliance's Capitol Combat pay-per-view show May 19 from the Washington, D.C., Armory.

1. Johnny Ace vs. Mean Mark
2. Tommy (Wildfire) Rich and Eddie (Hot Stuff) Gilbert vs. The Samoan Swat Team (Fatu and the Samoan Savage)
3. Loser gets his head shaved: Paul Ellering vs. Theodore R. Long
4. Corporal Punishment match: Rock & Roll Express (Ricky Morton and Robert Gibson) vs. The Fabulous Freebirds (Michael "P.S." Hayes and Jimmy "Jam" Garvin). Wrestlers bring leather belts into the ring and can use them as weapons during the match
5. Road Warriors and Norman vs. Kevin Sullivan and Cactus Jack Manson and Bam Bam Bigelow
6. United States tag team title: Tom (Z-Man) Zenk and Flyin' Brian Pillman vs. Jim Corrette's Midnight Express (Beautiful Bobby Eaton and Sweet Stan Lane.) Corrette will be placed in a cage at ringside during the match
7. NWA tag team title: Rick and Scott Steiner vs. Doom (Ron Simmons and Hacksaw Butch Reed) managed by Theodore R. Long
8. NWA tag team title in a steel cage match: Nature Boy Ric Flair vs. The Total Package Lex Luger

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Flair's loyalty to the NWA title (which others claim has turned into an obsession) and an annual contract estimated at \$550,000 to \$700,000, has kept him from joining the World Wrestling Federation and his most-lucrative potential opponent, Hulk Hogan.

Many believe a Hogan-Flair match on pay-per-view at a Wrestlemania would destroy the record \$21-million gross of Hogan's match with Randy Savage in 1989. There has been much discussion of such a match for Wrestlemania in 1991, particularly since the Hogan-Ultimate Warrior match April 1 drew far fewer pay-per-view orders than expected. But it's considered a long shot that Hogan and Flair will meet. Flair's NWA contract doesn't expire until 1992, and an extension through 1994 is on the table. And even though the WWF did do a joint card with two Japanese promoters last month, there is no way they would work with a rival group in this country now.

ETC: The NWA nearly got a major scare when Lex Luger came down with a staph infection in his knee last weekend, which could have put the Capitol Combat main event in jeopardy. NWA insiders claim Luger will be held out until Saturday's card, but his match with Ric Flair isn't in jeopardy. This will be Luger's final title shot at Flair if he fails to win. If Luger wins the championship, he'll be the first wrestler to hold the NWA's world and United States titles simultaneously since Buddy Rogers in 1961. . . . Another wrestler scheduled for the same card, Eddie Gilbert, suffered a torn rotator cuff a few days later and is doubtful. . . . Dusty Rhodes returned to action after being out three weeks with a broken toe on Thursday night in Niagara Falls, N.Y., to resume his feud with Randy (Macho King) Savage. . . . Roddy Piper, who took Rhodes's place against Savage while he was on the sidelines, is awaiting word this week from ABC-TV on whether the pilot he and Jesse Ventura did, called "Tag Team," will be picked up for the fall season. The schedule will be announced May 21. If the show is picked up, don't expect to see Piper wrestling anymore. Presumably Ventura would stay with the WWF as a television announcer even if the series is picked up.